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ABSTRACT

Students, teachers, principals, and communities in areas of high poverty and high proportion of minorities are struggling to improve their test scores in this time of high-stakes testing and accountability. Discrimination, inequities, and injustices prevalent in these schools and communities are also issues that must be addressed. Ten principals from 10 schools labeled as failing were interviewed in a previous study. Their responses were reanalyzed using the concept of social justice as a lens to frame this new study's investigation. Four major themes emerged from the interviews: (1) effects of poverty; (2) building organizational capacity; (3) high-stakes testing and grading of schools; and (4) recruitment and retention of quality teachers. Results suggest that it is the lack of understanding of the effects of poverty that limits children's success in high-poverty schools. School leaders today need to be aware of the effects of poverty on teaching and learning, to know what effective practices are and how to support them in their schools, to know how context influences their roles and relationships in schools and within their communities, and to embrace the role of the educator in schools of poverty to transform the opportunities for children of poverty, not to maintain the status quo. (Contains 18 references.) (RT)

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USING A LENS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE TO REFRAME PRINCIPALS' INTERVIEWS FROM HIGH POVERTY, LOW PERFORMING SCHOOLS

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Introduction

In this time of high-stakes testing and accountability, students, teachers, principals and communities in high poverty and schools of color are struggling to improve their test scores. However, it is much more than test scores that are important to these stakeholders. Discrimination, inequities, and injustices prevalent in these schools and communities are also issues to be addressed. This means that understanding differences in social class, mediated by race, becomes central to the debate around social and student problems of performance and achievement (cf. Anyon, 1997; Coleman, 1966; Ogbu, 1991; Mickelson, 2001). Payne (1998) posits, "The true discrimination that comes out of poverty is the lack of cognitive strategies" (p. 13) taught these students. It is important for all students to learn how to think critically and problem solve, however, it is imperative that high poverty schools provide their students with the educational and psychological support in the form of cognitive strategies, appropriate relationships, coping strategies, goal setting opportunities, and suitable instruction, both in content and discipline.

Payne (1998) posits that poverty is not just about the lack of financial resources. She defines it as "the extent to which an individual does without resources" (p. 16). She identifies eight resources that comprise her framework of poverty: *financial*, *emotional*, *mental*, *spiritual*, *physical*, *support systems*, *relationships/role models*, and *knowledge of hidden rules*. Payne explains that financial resources do not describe a person's ability to leave poverty; rather, the other resources are much more instrumental in the success of the person to make a life transition. She concludes, "Generally, in order to successfully move from one class to the next, it is important to have a spouse or mentor from the class to which you wish to move to model and teach you the hidden rules" (p. 18). Coleman (cited by Comer, 2001) defined this mentorship through his definition of social capital-what children gain from their relationships with parents and their social networks. Often, students of poverty live outside mainstream social networks, which could provide them with the support to make the transition into another class. They lack the appropriate role models and support systems inherent in these social networks to help them understand the hidden rules that Payne discusses. Schools frequently fail to transmit the necessary social capital to assist these students in moving from a marginalized position to a mainstream one as they enter the adult world (Comer, 2001). Time and again this failure occurs because teachers in schools of high poverty and schools of color fall short in defining, describing and deciding how their roles must be interpreted differently than teaching in a middle class school. It is easy to see why and how this happens to educators when you work in an educational system that holds up middle class learning as the norm. Even though teachers know that poor students are not coming to school with the same prior knowledge and experiences as more advantaged students, they are held hostage by the system—a system that holds them accountable for poor students learning at the *same rates* as their middle class peers and judges them accordingly.

We argue that the role of educators in schools of high poverty and schools of color must be regarded to assist students in gaining ground and accessing resources and

opportunities previously deprived them (i.e. social and cultural capital). Further, educators in these schools ought to be advocates for these children. In this sense, students who are already advantaged are not in need of the *same* social capital as students who are disadvantaged. Educators ought to assist all students, but acknowledge that the form this assistance takes varies based on educational needs and the prior experiences students have. Schools of poverty ought to provide students with the means to "catch up" to the middle class standard of education they are being held accountable. Schools are supposed to be the vehicles that promote democratic principles of social justice and pluralism, not institutionalize oppressive practices. This requires teachers to be transformative agents and see their roles as altering their students' lives of poverty to offer them the potential for constructing different lives.

Perspectives of Social Justice

In highlighting some of the injustices, inequities, and discrimination in the system, we begin our dialogue about how scholars suggest we might start to frame our discussion. Gordon (1999) argues that to address issues of social justice, we must ground our understandings in cognitive psychology and political theories, both, which nurture justice and democracy. Cognitive psychology assists educators in realizing and understanding how student learning can be enhanced, taking learners' frames of reference into account. Bonilla-Bowman (1999) suggests that concentrating exclusively on the cognitive component of social justice is insufficient. We must also recognize the affective domain and language of attitudes, dispositions, and values when addressing social justice and equity in educational achievement. The purposes of schooling for poor students and students of color ought to provide the same opportunities afforded middle-class and more affluent students. In other words, students who come from disadvantaged environments should not be penalized for their lack, but exposed to opportunities which open doors of access.

Rawls's (1971) political theory of justice gives us two mutually supporting ideas helpful for building our framework of social justice. First, he says that equity requires more than fair treatment of people. Secondly, he encourages us to think about a protective philosophy central to the values of our society that safeguards the most disadvantaged members. Gordon argues, "education is not an antidote to poverty" (p. 20). More accurately he advises, when subpopulations of students are systematically failing, we have a social responsibility to enhance, improve, enrich, and broaden their experiences, and to protect them against the effects of an unjust society. This social responsibility of how to protect the most disadvantaged members of our society was the genesis of our discussion about the inequities, discrimination, and injustices principals described.

Our Perspective of Social Justice

In a previous study, we interviewed ten principals from high poverty, low performing schools in Florida on their perspectives of Florida's accountability system. We became acutely aware of the discrimination, inequities, and injustices prevalent in these schools as a result of the state's accountability and school improvement reform efforts. These

discriminations, inequities, and injustices reported by the principals, we believe; as do the principals, limit the life success chances of these students. Therefore, we define social justice as fighting the inequities, discrimination, and injustices that impact student achievement and the success of all students. We view inequity as the inequality of meting out resources to schools on an equal basis, disregarding the different needs of a disadvantaged group. Inequities are institutionalized practices governing resource allocation, which are usually done according to bureaucratic formulas. Discrimination is prejudice toward a group, based on biased attitudes, dispositions, and values, which may be conscious or unconscious, and usually results in decisions that adversely impact the group's success. Injustices, on the other hand, perpetuate the myth that by treating everyone the same, holding everyone accountable to comparable standards, and giving them the "same" resources you are treating them fairly, even though the playing field is not level to start with. This last element of social justice is particularly troubling to us because so many erroneous conclusions can be drawn from unjust practices (e.g. like the label "failing schools" where schools are seen as bad schools, with incompetent teachers and principals). Instead of measuring growth and progress of student achievement over an academic year, which schools have control over; current policies and labels (i.e. low performing schools) seem to ignore growth that is measured in a fair way. Subsequently, although comparable learning may have taken place between child x and child y in different schools, child x started school behind and was already classified as a failure. If you have a lot of x's in your school, and not very many y's, you will most likely be labeled a failing school. We are not advocating that high poverty schools and schools of color be excused from attaining high standards. Rather, we are arguing poor students and student of color should be held accountable to standards that they have time to achieve. This requires a unique mindset about teaching and learning in these schools in which alternative ways to organize teaching and learning are explored and studied. Priorities that support educators and provide its citizenry with a greater understanding of the impact of poverty on early learning should be key to the understanding about learning gains over time. Making connections within the communities in which these schools operate is essential for maintaining hope, ongoing dialogue, and obtaining the extra resources needed. Principals are challenged to connect their schools with community networks and outside alliances to develop their school's capacity and build links with partner groups. State systems in turn are encouraged to think differently about the funding practices, which treat all schools alike and discourage innovative practices to increase student achievement.

Questions about how well we are able to make new connections hinge on our desires to do things differently to improve the opportunities of our less fortunate members in society. Notably, social justice is made up of two words that address this very issue. First the word *social* assumes that within the larger context of society, we can agree on what normative practices, standard policies, and general expectations should be in place to assist disadvantaged people. At the macro level we need to realize that the ideas about social justice will be abstract and can only be concretized at the local level where educational decisions are made. The word *justice* assumes that after some sort of consensus is attained at the state and community levels, we can agree on the criteria to make non-discriminatory decisions about how to allocate and distribute resources and

hold people accountable for the use of these resources. Finally, when you add the word *education* into the social justice equation, questions must be raised about how the shared societal expectations for all students in school, along with the criteria to judge school success, will be designed in an equitable manner. If the success of "all" children is our goal, then our society must come to grips with how to level the playing field for poor students to have access to an education that breaks the cycles of poverty. This means changing how we think about present practices.

Background

School-based accountability has been a driving reform in the state of Florida since 1991. With some of the largest school districts nationally, Florida's reform has run parallel to national trends over the last 10 to 15 years such as raising academic standards, adopting decentralized authority structures, systemic redesign, more criterion-referenced testing, increased concern over parent and community involvement, and outcries for more public accountability through the publication of individual school performance ratings (Florida Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability, 1997, p.14). Comprised of 67 counties, Florida school systems educate over 2.4 million Pre-K-12 students with 3,044 schools. Of that student population, 45% are minority, 21.9% live in poverty, and 14.6% have disabilities (Quality Counts 2001: Florida Policy Update, 2001).

Florida, as many other states, turned to standards to improve student learning. The latest information on statewide standards and accountability is that forty-nine states now have statewide academic standards for what students should know and be able to do in at least some subjects; 50 states test how well their students are learning; and 27 hold schools accountable for results, whether by rating student performance of all the schools or identifying low-performing schools (Quality Counts 2001, 2001). Florida not only developed and implemented a standards-driven reform, but also designed a performance-based assessment, the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) to assess students' progress on the standards. FCAT, measuring student progress in reading and math standards in grades 4th, 5th, 8th, and 10th, was first used for accountability measures for the school year 1998-99. Testing on science standards for accountability purposes will be implemented in 2003.

Since 1995, the first year Florida schools were identified as low performing; schools have been steadily making progress. With the passing of the A+ Plan in 1999, schools were given grades (A-F grade scale), based on student FCAT scores to identify schools from high performing to low performing. Schools graded "A" have nearly tripled over the last two years (FASA Meeting, 2000). However, it is important to note that the schools that are most often graded as a "D" or "F" also tend to be located in high poverty and high minority areas. In a study conducted by the Miami-Dade County School System to determine possible indicators of low performing schools in their district, high percentages of free and reduced lunch and mobility were the biggest predictors of low performing schools (Jianguo, 1999). It is these schools we work and base our research.

Principal Interviews

Our previous study examined how principals in low performing, and high poverty schools of color were resisting the labels of low performance and attempting to level the accountability playing fields for their schools by improving externally, to meet the state of Florida's accountability plan, and internally, by addressing their school's organizational capacity (Neumann, F. M., King, M. B., & Rigdon, M., 1997). By interviewing ten principals from schools labeled as failing schools, we gleaned a better understanding of how these principals balanced the external accountability mandates of high stakes testing in the state of Florida, while addressing the internal needs of their schools. The *Florida System of School Improvement and Accountability* provided the framework for understanding the external context of accountability, while the principals' stories of their struggles gave us insights on how they addressed the internal development of their schools.

Four themes (with subthemes) emerged from the interviews: (1) the effects of poverty, (2) building organizational capacity, (3) high stakes testing: grading the schools, and (4) recruitment and retention of quality teachers. Throughout the interviews the principals spoke of the effects of poverty on four areas: *demographic patterns, language barriers and deficits* [students bring to school], the *degree of parental support*, and the *cultural and socio-economic value differences*. These four subthemes defined the challenges principals perceived in meeting external accountability, meeting the internal accountability of their schools, and building capacity. It seems the hidden subtext to poverty is the associated at-risk factors of school failure (e.g. school drop-outs, teen pregnancy, absenteeism, frequent tardiness, school aggression, and lack of meaning of an education), which these principals face daily.

Many of the principals recognized that it was critical to build the organizational capacity of the school in order to move it forward. For a number of reasons, the principals acknowledged that this was their greatest challenge. The subthemes for this theme were: *it takes a whole school, changing instructional practices,* and *principal's beliefs and values.* In respect to a third theme, high stakes testing: grading the schools, principals were not against Florida's accountability system. What caused their anger and frustration, they reported, was the method the state uses to hold schools accountable, as if all schools are the same -- with the same students, the same communities, and the same needs. The resounding agreement, however, was the disapproval of grading schools based on one test, the FCAT. The principals addressed high stakes testing and grading schools from the perspective of: *measuring student growth and progress*, *equity*, *using data*, and *impact on schools*.

Finally, the last theme, recruitment and retention of quality, effective teachers is a large problem for these schools because many teachers do not want to teach in high poverty schools with at-risk students. So, they don't apply. Then there is the problem of retaining those effective teaches who do teach at the high poverty schools. Poverty schools tend to

have a higher teacher mobility rate for a variety of reasons. Principals shared their perspectives on retention and recruitment with reference to three areas: *veteran teachers' attitudes: terminating ineffective teachers and teacher mobility,* and, *training ground for teachers.*

Purpose and Research Question

Based on the previous study results and for the purposes of this paper, we used our definition of social justice as a lens to reexamine the principals' interview data. In reexamining the principal responses and the four themes, we asked two broad questions, "How do the principals describe the discrimination, inequities, and injustices against children of poverty and children of color?" and "How do principals seek to provide educational opportunities that create a learning environment free of discrimination, inequities, and injustices for students of poverty and color?"

Method and Data Sources

The previous study and this particular study are part of a larger qualitative and ethnographic study planned over several years to examine the social, institutional, economic, cultural, attitudinal, and organizational factors in high poverty/minority, low performing schools. We began this initial investigation with 10 principals in Florida schools graded "D" and "F." Informal data collection began several years ago while working with these principals providing professional development. During this time, we began taking field notes and worked to establish relationships with these principals. The interviews reexamined for the present study were conducted over a period of several months, with over 90 hours of transcriptions, which were coded and analyzed using a phenomenological approach like that of Graumann (1994), who views the everyday experiences of participants (principals in our study) as the starting point to discover the themes in participant language and experiences. As Graumann said, "we let...our subjects spell out the problems from their perspective, and above all, in their own words" (p. 286).

Data sources were semi-structured interviews, our field notes, and observations. We established trustworthiness through individual member checks with all participants, researcher debriefings after each interview, and arrived at agreement on all the codes and categories. For this study, as in the previous study, we followed the steps outlined in Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Miles and Huberman (1994). We reviewed the interviews and then came together to discuss insights and analysis as they related to our definition of social justice. From the discussion, we identified the responses in the transcribed interviews as they related to discrimination, inequities, and injustices. And third, we divided the responses into two overarching categories. The first category describes how principals view social justice based on their perspectives of injustices, inequities, and discrimination against students of poverty and color. The second category looks at principals' responses that seek to engender a more socially just environment in their schools.

Participants

Because of the sensitive nature of these interviews, and in order to insure confidentiality to our participants, we chose not to give specific information about the schools or the principals, but rather to give general descriptions about the demographics of these schools and districts. All of these principals are experienced elementary school principals, many of whom have given their lives to improve the educational opportunities for the children in their schools. The ethnic background of the principals is white, African American, and Hispanic; and the gender make-up is one male and nine female principals. The principals' schools are in west central and southeast Florida. Most of the schools had an excess of 90% of the students on free and reduced lunch, and one school had close to a 100% of its students on free and reduced lunch. There were, however, several schools that only had about 60% of their students on free and reduced lunch. The mobility rates were also high in these schools. Mobility rates varied from 40 to 85%. Further, these schools were made up of students from different ethnic and racial backgrounds (e.g. Haitian Creole, African American, Jamaican, Caucasian, Hispanic-- from Mexico, Venezuela, Cuba, and Columbia).

Principals' Perspectives: Fighting Discrimination, Inequities, and Injustices

This section reports how principals describe social justice based on their perspectives of discrimination, inequities, and injustices against students of poverty and color. Principals identified three broad areas: (a) testing disadvantaged children and comparing them to advantaged children for accountability purposes; (b) teacher recruitment, retention, and mobility; and (c) teachers' attitudes concerning children of poverty and color and their lack of understanding of the effects of poverty on the teaching and learning process.

Testing disadvantaged children and comparing them to advantaged children for accountability purposes

Principals in our study were painfully aware of the disadvantages poor children and children of color suffered when they first entered school. Already behind, their language and experiential deficits, low parental expectations for student achievement, and different values and cultural orientations were mentioned by all of the principals interviewed. Depending on the context of the school, language and experiential deficits varied in extent and degree. Some schools were struggling with a number of non-English speaking students. Principals in these schools repeatedly said that not knowing English was not the most challenging problem faced. The most challenging problem was the limited vocabulary students knew in their native language coupled with their insufficient or non-existent exposure to printed materials before entering school. Simultaneously, the experiential deficits of these students made the acquisition of new concepts difficult to attain. Disadvantaged students' lacked the prior knowledge necessary to make learning connections. Teachers who were insensitive to this fact often made assignments impossible for these students to complete. A principal related this story about a student in trouble. She begins the story by describing the effects of poverty.

First of all, because they are poor they do not go places. So, when you have not experienced something, you cannot relate to it--you cannot write about it. Let me give you an example. Two years ago a little boy was in Time Out for misbehaving in the room and he was supposed to be writing to a prompt about a time when he was on a roller coaster. I happened to walk by and he wasn't working, so I said, "Why aren't you working? Didn't your teacher give you work?" "Yes." and he showed it to me. "Well, you know, when you go on a roller coaster like at Disney World on Space Mountain." And he just looked at me. I asked him if he was ever at Disney World—"No." "Do you know what Space Mountain is?" " No." "Have you ever been on a roller coaster"? " No." So how can you write about the feeling in the pit of your stomach if you haven't experienced it? So that's one issue: they're poor and they don't go places.

Stories like this one highlight how experiential deficits and language are closely related. If you do not have prior knowledge, you cannot talk or write about something unfamiliar to you. Comparisons of advantaged children to disadvantaged children discriminate against poor students. Judgments against these students grounded in assumptions of sameness often accompany these comparisons. Understanding poverty becomes critical to building a common language with a staff. *I want every teacher to have a copy of that book [Frameworks of Poverty] and I want us to read it together, and I want us to discuss it together because if we understand where the poverty child is coming from, then we can better help that child. And I don't think we have a real feel. It's real hard for middle class eyes to see into poverty so we have to have someone who has done that research...*

So we see that even though the educators feel that it is unfair to compare high poverty and schools of color to their more affluent counter parts, educators who do not understand the effects of poverty fall into the same trap as others unless there is a conscious effort to understand. One principal describes how his own education as a poor student and student of color was a message of high expectations, and teachers understood that students needed to gain access to mainstream networks for his success.

When [I] look at what was given to me when I was growing up, was the fact that my expectations were very high. They [the teachers] expected a lot from us. They would not say that it was all right because you learned English as a second language, and the first language you ever learned was Spanish because your grandparents never spoke English and most of the language in your neighborhood was Spanish. It was not all right for you not to have the correct elocution or say the words correctly; they would show you the right pronunciation. The expectation of language was there. They knew what we students had to do to compete and to be part of the mainstream. They also would say to us, because you have come from this environment doesn't mean that you don't have the capacity or the potential to be whatever it is that you want to be. ...Now what happens today is that a youngster goes into a school setting in a climate that's different from the climate I was in (where the values systems were all the same} and the teachers were there and made sure that we were told, "You can become the doctor."

Another principal describes the inequities in the way the accountability system operates against their school.

> *No matter what your surroundings or whatever your demographics are, you're coming to the table whether we have the same deck of cards. When we deal your hand, it's just the same as the hand dealt in [the more affluent areas.] And they [State] expect the results to be the same. Whereas the demographics in [those areas] are even...[ours] are completely different. It's like we're playing by the same set of rules, but we don't get to have all the parts to the game.*

Principals refer to this accountability game as "being under the gun," "fighting the battle," feeling "battered" and "brow-beaten." One principal said that it is as if poor schools have leprosy. You often feel like the lone ranger in fighting for your students. Principals see their work with students as more than just having them score well on a test. Poor students are at different developmental stages of readiness when they enter school. This fact seems to be ignored by the policy makers of the state. One principal says,

> *The governor says there will be no excuses, and I agree with him on minority issues, but the poverty in my mind is the overriding factor. If you have a minority child living in an affluent home, they will score as well as a white child. But if you have a white child living in a poverty-stricken home, they will score as poorly as a poor, minority child. So in my mind it has everything to do with poverty.*

This discrimination against poor students does not end with the students. Teaches and administrators who work in these schools are looked down upon by their peers as incompetent. Comments about the reasons a teacher or an administrator would stay in poor schools are made frequently. Administrators are given bad evaluations because their schools are graded deficiently. The fact that the school is improving and students are showing growth seems to be ignored. One principal used this analogy. Remember the story of the emperor not wearing any clothes and no one would tell him—they just acted like he was wearing clothes. That is how I see the relationship of the school districts to the state right now. The silence from the top district leadership about the inequities in the system is disturbing. District leadership fell right into line in blaming these schools. This may be the greatest injustice of all, because both the state and the district failed to acknowledge their complicity in all of this.

Finally, further injustices are heaped upon students when the already flawed system of comparing students of poverty and color with advantaged students reasons that you cannot give students who are behind grade level passing grades. Now we see how the fallacies of the unjust grading system folds back on itself. Students who come to school to learn are not being judged on what they have learned, but what they didn't know when they entered school.

Teacher Recruitment and Retention

High poverty schools are generally schools that are not perceived as the most ideal places to teach for a variety of reasons. These schools tend to have less resources to work with, substandard facilities, children who come to school several years behind their peers, high

teacher mobility, and communities with limited economic potential. These reasons set up the discrimination, inequity and injustice that principals struggle with everyday in high poverty schools.

One of the major obstacles to school improvement and reform in high poverty schools, the principals identify, is recruitment and retention of quality, effective teachers. Recruitment is a problem because many teachers do not want to teach in high poverty schools with at-risk students. Principals discuss how school demographics alone - the school location, the school facilities, and the housing - often make it even more difficult to recruit and retain the best and brightest teachers. One principal notes, *"with my school being an older school, an "F" school, a small school, hard to teach kids -- I'm not the first one people apply to. I feel like the cream-of-the-crop teachers are swallowed up by the academies and by the new schools."*

Another issue that impacts teachers' perceptions of teaching at a high poverty school is the children who attend. Students of poverty are often more difficult to work with than children from more affluent schools because they often come to school lacking academic and social skills. Add to those difficulties the grading of schools, and teachers and principals find it difficult to maintain the energy and consistency necessary to be successful in these schools every day for extended periods of time. One principal stated, *"It is easier to work in an "A" graded school than it is to work in a "D" graded school."* Because many veteran teachers choose to stay at more affluent, often higher performing (high grades) schools, the teacher pool for high poverty schools tends to be beginning teachers and ineffective teachers. A high percentage of beginning teachers begin their careers in lower socioeconomic schools, but then move to more affluent schools. A principal comments,

> *We are seeing teachers who are beginning in lower socioeconomic schools, but then moving to other schools because it is just a little bit easier and the challenges just aren't as great and they are also leaving education.*

A concern that principals speak with passion about is the issue of teacher mobility. There are many reasons teachers leave schools, but poverty schools tend to have a higher teacher mobility rate for a variety of reasons. A principal comments,

> *I have a hard time getting staff. I've just checked my statistics and I lose about ¼ of my teachers every year. They go for one reason or another. I don't know if it's stress over the grade; I don't know whether it's just being at the school, the stress at teaching at this kind of school; I don't know if they want to be closer to home. I guess it is all of those, but when you are constantly in the training mode with your staff it is really hard to get ahead.*

More times than not, principals report teachers leave the school and transfer to other schools because working at a high poverty school graded "D" or "F" is difficult.

One principal states,

> *Sometimes the issues that teachers deal with on a day-to-day basis are just so overwhelming because of the cultural mismatch, because of the expectations--just a number of things that simply overwhelm them because they don't know what to expect. I think that if we could get teachers properly trained and sensitized to the children's issues that they are trying to teach, we could make greater strides.*

Another reason discussed for the high teacher mobility rates in these schools is a direct result of the negative perceptions of teaching at a low performing school. Principals were most avid when speaking of the impact the grading has had on their students, their teachers, and their communities. Many used the words such as "demoralizing," "devastating," and "destabilizing" when they speak about how the children and teachers have been affected by the grading system. Principals discuss how publicizing the school grades has a negative effect on the students and teachers of low graded schools –

> *The schools that have made the "F" and the "D" grades and scored really low and gotten all the publicity are the ones that need this kind of criticism the least. These are kids that already come from F lives, F families F neighborhoods. And now the state is saying you are an F student and we are going to show you are an F by publicizing it all over the world. Talking about that, if you are told too often that you are an "F" or "D" person (and everyone has an idea of what an "F" or "D" person is), you start believing it after a while.*

Finally, principals described their schools as training grounds for the more affluent schools. Because "D" and "F" schools, high poverty schools particularly, have difficulty retaining teachers, these schools also tend to have high numbers of beginning teachers, first year teachers or teachers new to the district or school itself. The principals report that they have many beginning teachers every year in which they must acculturate them into the school, and train them on the different academic programs at the school, as well as the district programs. They echo the frustration of training and supporting teachers only to lose them to other more affluent, less difficult schools. One principal comments,

> *They [the other schools] don't have to worry about training new teachers because we train them all here!*

Principals posit that poverty schools are turning out good teachers because accountability forces them to improve. However, it is a double-edge sword one principal reports,

> *Teachers come here, they get the training--we do a good job of training teachers in this area, an excellent job of training. As soon as they become expert teachers, they become very attractive to other schools.*

Principals know the effect a high teacher-turnover has on building a trusting safe learning environment, one that children of poverty require. They know what it means to the school culture and learning environment when children are exposed to ineffective teachers and/or teachers coming and going with no stability and consistency. They see the effects on learning when children have not learned to trust and form relationships because every time they try to connect, the teacher leaves or the next year there are new faces they do not know teaching them. These are the untold effects of poverty on the teaching and learning process.

This lack of consistency and stable faculty on the children concerns the principals we interviewed greatly. They perceive the challenge of recruiting teachers and high teacher mobility as discriminative and unjust for their students. This challenge often prevents them from providing their students the opportunity of a safe, trusting, quality learning environment necessary for the teaching and learning process.

Teachers' attitudes concerning children of poverty and color and their lack of understanding of the effects of poverty on the teaching and learning process

The area most troubling is the teachers' attitudes concerning children of poverty and color and their lack of understanding of the effects of poverty on the teaching and learning process. We found as we talked with principals that a high number of teachers teaching in schools of poverty had disturbing attitudes about children of poverty such as – these children can't learn; and teachers don't think they can teach these children. Many principals discussed with us their challenge of changing these teacher attitudes that shape what teachers do in their classrooms that directly affect a students ability to learn and progress. A principal shared,

> *Unfortunately, there are members of this staff that do not believe that all children can learn and they very openly will state – well, they just can't do any better. Until those teachers believe that they have power within them to make a difference, and that they can truly teach in a way that these children can learn, we're fighting an uphill battle.* The principal goes on to say, *given the right circumstances; I believe that every child can learn. And I just don't think this staff has embraced that yet. It is a set of values that's going to take over a period of time to build.*

Children of poverty present many complex problems for teachers. What seems evident is that most teachers have not been prepared to teach students of poverty, and they do not have the experiences necessary to teach these types of children. One principal describes teachers not being prepared and lacking efficacy, that is teachers believing "I can do it, I can teach any kid, you give them to me they will learn." She states, *"they don't feel that can and then they don't feel the students can."* This seems to be one of the biggest obstacles high poverty schools face in their school improvement efforts. For students of poverty to have equity in their education, teachers must first believe they can teach students from disadvantaged homes, and then, even more importantly, teachers have to believe that these children can learn.

Unintentionally (we hope), teachers' cultural and economic biases often blind them from doing the right thing as it relates to providing an equitable educational program. A good example of this kind of attitude interfering with the teaching and learning process is a story a principal shared about moving to a low performing school.

> *When I came here in July, and we began to have our conversations of why School B is a "D" school, the conversation always went to the same place – well, these kids can't speak English – yet, when I was looking at the data, what I was seeing, yes, our Hispanic kids weren't performing so great, but neither are our black kids, or neither are our white kids. So, I'm thinking this is not all language,*

meaning language other than English. In fact that is not the whole problem, but that was the mindset of the majority of this staff – if they just spoke English, we could fix that. But, when you look at the data and you get them to look at the data, and all of a sudden, you realize that your other children are not performing either, then there has got to more than not having English as your first language. So, what we began to do, and it took several months, and bringing other people and other sets of eyes, and other backgrounds in, and talking to folks, but I think, at least a small group we've worked with so closely have begun to understand it is not about not speaking English, it is about not having language skills period!

Teachers must believe they are the transformative agents for these children and that they are the vessels to provide learning opportunities and experiences that develop the social capital to meet the unique needs of students of poverty. It is through understanding the effects of poverty and not judging it as a detriment to learning that students will be provided the teaching and learning environment that will improve their academic and social capital.

Principals' Response to Providing a Socially Just Teaching and Learning Environment

This section addresses how principals are doing two things simultaneously to create socially just teaching and learning environments for students of poverty and color - developing their schools and changing their schools' organization. For these principals, this means building community inside and outside of their schools; using data to inform decision making, using resources effectively; and developing teacher leaders. A principal said that teachers could not accomplish the task of student learning alone anymore. Teachers, administrators (school-based and district-based), parents, and the community at large must work together to make learning happen in these schools; it takes a whole school and community to educate our children today.

Principals discuss how important parental and community support is in their efforts to educate disadvantaged students and their disadvantaged parents. To help parents understand the changes in what students need to know and be able to do, all of the principals described how they instituted programs that shared with parents the differences in expectations for learning in standards-based environment. One principal reported that a parent complained that her third grade child was expected to do sixth grade work. The principal explained the grade level expectations that all third graders were accountable for achieving. Another principal talks about the role of the entire staff in making sure the kids learn.

... I feel that the entire faculty plays a role in setting the tone for what's expected at their school. It's from the principal down, and one should say from the students to the teachers up. They [the state policy makers] have taken a stand that we want our kids to be on grade level--there's no exception to that. How we get them there is our problem...

This same principal talks about what the school members have learned over time.

> *And one of the things that we've learned, the school as a whole, is that everything that is good for somebody else is not good for us. That's why I took them to that other school that went from an "F" to an "A." I wanted them to see what it is that they were doing that we could possibly do without a lot of pain and grief and resentment. And not saying that is going to work for us. We can't afford not to try it. At first some people said that the other school had this or they had that. Okay, everything that they said that they had, if I did not have it here I made sure I got it. That takes away excuses. That meant that I couldn't buy something else, but I wanted them to have everything they said the other school had that we didn't have. That puts the ball back in our court. Now, it's how we pitch it that's going to make the difference of a home run or not.*

Building community outside of school was less apparent. One principal reported being able to ask business organizations like the Chamber as well as the district to fund a project that she believed would improve communication with parents and the community.

> *I'm trying to improve parent communication by improving the sign out here [in front of the school]. I had a new sign built, and it was almost $4000 and I went to the Chamber first because I had this idea if I included them in the sign...This is a real active community, and I am in the Chamber of Commerce [so] they [the Chamber] have things going on downtown in the park all the time. So I had this idea if I shared the sign with the city maybe they would kick in some money. So they paid for half the sign and I got business partners to pay for the rest of it. So I got a $4000 sign paid for. I got the district to agree to put up the brick base – they are going to donate the brick and the time to do that.*

Principals reported that the most dramatic shift in their roles as leaders occurred in the collection and management of school data. Principals complained that they had not been trained to think about how to make data-based decisions. The reasons for this stem from the district not expecting principals to collect and analyze data in the past, not being trained by their districts to analyze data, and/or lacking the tools to collect and analyze data. Some principals felt very comfortable in this new role, while others were growing into it. One principal makes the point that when the district schools were taking the CTBS, the district would send them information, but they didn't know what to do with it, and the district didn't tell them what to do with it. Now there is more training and information as well as assistance from the districts in disaggregating the data for schools. What was clear was that these principals saw their new role maintaining an academic focus, providing feedback to teachers, and keeping the faculty focused on results.

> *When we have our grade-level meetings (they meet once a week to plan the curriculum), they look at the data; they've already decided what they're going to do for the whole nine weeks (you saw their theme). Once they decide what they're going to do for the whole nine weeks, we decide each month what skills we're going to be working on. Once they decide what skills they're going to be working on that week, then teachers are back in their classrooms gathering stuff, which they bring to the grade level meeting and everybody shares. So that's how we are working.*

There was a perceived lack of district support both in financial and human resources. In most cases, principals felt district personnel added more stress and work rather than support and provided them with little funding to improve their schools. This led to many strained relationships that previously had been positive. Several principals even commented that the districts had given them less support since high stakes accountability—standing on the side lines and watching what the schools did to bring up their scores. But this was not the perception of all the principals. One principal commented on her special relationship with a district person who had been very helpful in school development. She compared her past assistance with the present help and concluded that the individual made the difference, not the district.

Principals desire district support that is helpful, not punitive, and does not make them feel like they and their schools are constantly under surveillance. Principals convey the feeling that the state and districts use scare tactics and intimidation to get all students to the same place with the grading of schools.

> *If your school didn't make it, then you were called on the carpet. Now, it went to the State saying that we have to have a certain amount of our students have certain scores, and if you don't do it, we're [the State] going to grade you a "D" or an "F." If they're [schools] not improving in the three years time that the State wants, then you're going to be "spanked," and [you're] told the school will be taken away from the district, etc. They used all these scare tactics and what it amounted to was that they believed that we were incompetent.*

Several of the principals voice their interest in developing and nurturing teacher leaders through professional development and coaching. Principals share that this is what will sustain their schools, even if the principal should leave the school.

> *So developing that teacher leadership as a part of a school function is incredibly powerful. I want to build the capacity in them that when a new administrator comes in who's not very nice or who treats them poorly, that they can just stand right up and say, "No, here's the way we do things around here. This is what works here, and this is the way we're going to do it." Now, I would like to teach them how to do that because they're not going to do anything wrong; they're just going to try to always do things right.*

Another principal comments:

> *I have spent this entire year I've been here, these months that I've been here trying to build teacher leaders and to identify them, you have to nurture them, you have to put them in a position they can become a teacher leader, and they have to build credibility with their peers. And that is what we have spent some time doing this year.*

As a means of developing teacher leaders, all the principals provided ongoing professional development for their faculties to address the needs of students. Principals talked about study groups, working on what data the school was going to collect, the

questions they were going to pose about the data, language and literacy skill development, and aligning the curriculum with the standards. Many shared how they met with their with teachers more frequently than in previous years to discuss students - what students were learning, which ones were not making progress and why – and to plan for improved or enhanced curriculum, instruction and assessment. The lines between professional development and the ongoing assessment of students were blurred. Ongoing assessments revealed areas that needed improvement both for students and teachers. This they believe is the positive aspect of accountability.

Although the principals recognized the need for teacher leaders they also voiced the difficulty letting go of their authority and empowering teacher leaders because of the high stakes involved in leading a high poverty, low performing school (e.g., poor grades, publicity, potential for losing position). Many of them spoke of teacher burnout at an all-time high for teachers. Principals report that teachers feel the repercussions of the grades by both their peers and community. Principals see themselves as the cheerleaders to provide support for their teachers when students made progress no matter how small it was. They hesitate to add anymore to the already full plate of teachers.

Discussion

One of our colleagues makes the distinction between correcting what is wrong and addressing what is right. This paper is about both of these things. To begin the dialogue about how to create a more socially just education for poor students and students of color requires the consciousness-raising of people. As the women's movement addressed of institutionalized biases against women, so must scholars address these same institutionalized prejudices against students of poverty and color. We see evidence of this discrimination against these students in state policies, educators' practices, and state and local resource allocations. Further, we see how these injustices continue to perpetuate the lower achievement of poor students and students of color. The effects of poverty are seen in unsafe neighborhoods, lack of health care, inadequate housing, and substandard wages paid to poor parents (Feldman, 2001). It is a myth to think that we can achieve equal education through accountability testing alone.

In a groundbreaking longitudinal study over a period of 20 years conducted by three Johns Hopkins scholars (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2001), known as the Baltimore Study, 20 schools were selected and studied on the basis of their social and racial compositions. Attempting to explain why poor schools do worse academically than children from middle-class and affluent families, the researchers looked at two major areas: differences in schools and differences in home environment. The findings were surprising. Poor and middle-class children made comparable achievement gains during the school year. Middle-class children, however, made greater gains during the summer while poor or disadvantaged children often lost ground academically. The researchers concluded that it's not true that schools are shortchanging the poor, minority children; poor kids need more than they are getting. The researchers noted, however, that middle-class parents had the appropriate attitudes to insure the success of their children. They took an active role, knew more about the school programs their children participated in

than poor parents did, and understood how the school worked. Middle-class parents knew what determined success and how to negotiate the complex bureaucracy in relation to their future interests. In contrast, poor parents relied on educators to interpret the system for them. They were intimidated by the rules and conventions of schools and advised their children to follow the rules, relying on professional authority rather that deciding for themselves. The Baltimore Study concluded parents' expectations for children's school performance, even before their children started school, was about the same importance as family SES for predicting cognitive growth. This points to the critical role educators play in helping poor families increase their expectations for their children's success and provide them with the necessary social capital to navigate the system.

In terms of school development, Florida focused their reform efforts on grading schools to improve student achievement in low performing schools. In contrast in Connecticut, state policy makers took a different stance. They did not invest in state accountability testing but focused on school development over time to lay the groundwork for a high quality education for all students (Wilson, Darling-Hammond, & Berry, 2001). Connecticut's concentration on better teaching and standards-based reform paid off. They were the only state in a 1998 study of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) with the Third International Mathematics and Science Study to be outranked by Singapore in science in the world. Connecticut's support system for new teachers, along with aligning student assessments to emerging teacher standards and low stakes testing, rather than high stakes testing, proved to be effective state reform. The state made their objectives for testing widely available, disaggregated data by similar student school student populations, and provided additional resources to the neediest districts, including funds for lower class sizes, professional development for teachers and administrators, and preschool and all-day kindergarten. When students failed, educators were asked to investigate the reasons for this failure and then given the resources needed to address improvements in student achievement.

Recommendations for Preparation and Professional Development for Educational Leaders

Leading a high poverty, low performing school is a difficult, complex task. Darling-Hammond (1997) in her book, The Right to Learn: A Blueprint for Creating Schools that Work, states,

> Clearly, issues of power and privilege contribute to the continuation of poor schooling for many children, and the effects of racism and classism cannot be ignored…I have also come to believe that much of the reason for the current sorry state of many schools is a genuine lack of understanding on the part of policymakers and practitioners about what is needed to produce schools that can teach for understanding in the context of a complex, pluralistic society (p. xvi).

We believe it is the lack of understanding of the effects of poverty that limit children of high poverty schools' success. Building on the principals' responses, our work with these schools, and other schools like them, we have found that school leaders today need the following knowledge, skills and dispositions to effectively lead a high poverty school.

- School leaders need to be aware of the effects of poverty on teaching and learning and the research on schools that are making a difference.
- School leaders must know what effective practices are and how to support them in their schools.
- School leaders must systematically study the effects of pedagogical practices on improved student learning and achievement in high poverty schools and schools of color and create time for school discussion to ensure the practices become part of the culture of the school.
- School leaders should know how context influences their roles and relationships in schools and within their communities.
- School leaders embrace the role of the educator in schools of poverty to transform the opportunities for children of poverty, not to maintain the status quo.
- School leaders ought to develop the capacities of their staffs to address complex educational challenges, not rely on outside consultants and expensive programs.
- School leaders need to partner with and form alliances with similar schools of poverty and schools of color in their district as well as other district and with members in the community to share best practices and examine practices and policies that contribute to the problems.

In this time of high stakes testing and accountability, principals who captain schools of poverty need more than the traditional education and preparation to be a school leader. It is essential that students of educational leadership and administration be prepared to meet the challenges faced by principals of high poverty schools discussed in this paper, and acquire the knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary to be effective school principals. Because many first year principals do not get the "cream of the crop", as one principal noted, school as their first assignment, we as leadership educators must provide our students the experience and knowledge that will ensure their success in high poverty schools and schools of color. We offer the following recommendations for educational leadership programs.

Because today's principals are considered the school instructional leader, the principal is responsible for providing information to teachers on curriculum, instruction, and assessment as well as to support teachers in providing an appropriate learning environment. The teaching and learning process for students of poverty requires a different environment than the more advantaged schools. These children come to school already behind in academic and social skills and are playing catch-up with their more advantaged peers from the beginning of their education career. Principals and teachers need to know what works and what doesn't. Research on high poverty schools that are making a difference should be included in educational leadership programs to provide evidence and information on how these schools have improved. Research, like the findings from the Baltimore Study and the work of other researchers on effective practices in schools with poor and students of color ought to be widely disseminated, analyzed, and discussed in classes. It is through education and appropriate preparation that principals and teachers will acquire a better understanding of poverty and how to transform the opportunities for these children, not to maintain the status quo.

To effectively lead a school, future school leaders must study the effects of pedagogical practices on improved student learning and achievement for students of poverty. Kozol (1991) in explaining his rationale behind writing his book, Savage Inequalities, states, "pedagogic problems in our cities are not chiefly matters of injustice, inequality or segregation, but of insufficient information about teaching strategies" (p. 51). Time for discussing pedagogy and instructional practices should be an integral element of school culture. Educational leadership programs must provide future school leaders with effective instructional pedagogy as it relates to student of poverty and color, as well as capacity building methods that create a school culture that embraces faculty study and dialogue. It is crucial for school leaders to develop the capacities of their staffs to address complex educational challenges, rather that relying on outside consultants and expensive programs for school development (Darling-Hammond, 1997). Principals ought to see their role as mentor, coach, and culture builder with the skills and dispositions to accomplish the task.

Principals should understand how context influences their roles and relationships in schools and within their communities. This is the basis of contextual leadership. Educational leadership programs must provide their students with the knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary to provide teaching and learning environments that meet the unique needs of students of poverty and color. It is no longer enough to be aware and sensitive to groups unlike us. For school leaders to affect change both inside and outside of the school they need a better understanding of the context in which they lead. Students of leadership need field experiences in different contexts – high poverty as well as wealthy schools and communities, community organizations that serve high poverty communities – to better understand the effects of poverty and their role in affecting change within this context.

Lastly, one area often slighted in educational leadership programs is how school leaders work and collaborate with other entities. Educational leadership programs should address the issue of partnering – what it is, how to do it, and why it is important to school improvement. District leaders as well as school-based leaders need to learn the skills of developing partnerships. Such partnerships could be with poor schools and schools of color within their own districts as well as with other districts, with community businesses, and with higher education institutions. By examining practices and policies, school leaders may learn what may be contributing to the problems and begin to determine solutions.

It is our responsibility as leadership educators to address the needs of high poverty schools and communities in a more direct way than we have in the past. As we know, most of our leadership students will begin their principalships in high poverty and color, often low performing schools. It is a disservice to our students as well as to students attending high poverty schools if we do not design our programs to better include methods for leading schools of poverty and schools of color.

Conclusions

We found that most of the principals were comfortable discussing poverty-related issues. However, none of the principals discussed the inequities of poverty and race that seem to go hand-in-hand in our culture. It is our great concern that if states, districts, and schools do not become more committed to altering the life success patterns for all children, particularly children of color and in poverty, our nation is in great peril. In a book entitled, The Careless Society: Community and its Counterfeits by John McKnight (1995), the whole notion of why institutionalized reforms fail is explained. Institutions have stripped power away from communities and made them impotent by providing strong service systems—systems that send the message to parents that I know what is best for you and your child. McKnight argues that care is the "consenting commitment of citizens to one another. Care cannot be produced, provided, managed, organized, administered, or commodified" (p. x). The warning for educators implicit in what McKnight is saying is that poor parents need to be involved in attaining social capital to negotiate the educational system. They need professionals who enable them to learn about the system, but place the responsibility for change back on the communities. Educators are only one of the players.

The only way we can begin to level the playing field is to create more shared responsibility and accountability systems in our schools and greater community involvement. This means making a concerted effort to insure that the necessary opportunities and resources are available to people, so as Dewey (1966) advised, people can participate fully in a political and social cultural life. For to continue to systematically deny access to groups of students through neglecting to translate the rules of the middle class into high expectations for their success is antithetical to our democracy. Educators, policy-makers, and communities must make a renewed commitment to improve schools for all students of poverty and color.

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